

# Digital Library Collaboration Gives a Reading Boost to Moms in Bexar County Jail

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The Bexar County Sheriff's Office has a history of innovation in its inmate programming, and its Mothers And Their Children (MATCH) Program is a prime example. MATCH, based at the Bexar County Adult Detention Center, has had several notable firsts in its history. In February 1984, Bexar County was first in the nation to implement a parent-child contact visitation program for inmate mothers in a county jail setting.

Thirty years later, the MATCH program has partnered with the first all-digital library in the United States. MATCH pioneered with Bexar County's BiblioTech Digital Library to help incarcerated mothers connect with their children through reading. On February 10, 2014, the Bexar County Adult Detention Center became first in the nation to allow inmates to utilize e-readers for educational purposes, with MATCH leading the way.

MATCH was originally launched with sponsorship by Bexar County Detention Ministries, Inc. However, with effort and support from the Junior League of San Antonio, the MATCH program was solidified when it became the recipient of county funding in 1986.

## Parent/Child Bonds Matter

Developing research on incarcerated parents consistently shows that contact visits between an incarcerated mother and her child or children lessen the trauma and other adverse effects experienced by the child left behind.

The importance of children maintaining contact with their incarcerated parents has been increasingly understood since the 1980s, when the number of women in jails and prisons began to rise significantly. Chaplains, social workers, and others who interact with jail inmates and their families began to see how the trauma of separation affects children. Studies have shown that the degree of parental involvement impacts the future delinquency of children (see, for

example, Rankin and Kern, 1994). Also, the lack of parenting skills is a factor that contributes to juvenile delinquency, according to Larzelere and Patterson (1990) and others.

We also know, through the landmark ACE study coordinated by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, that parental incarceration is an Adverse Childhood Event (ACE) that can contribute to lifelong emotional and health problems.

MATCH staff members understand that the emotional bonding that occurs between a parent and child is essential for healthy development. The mission of the MATCH program is to modify the behavior of incarcerated mothers through parenting and life skills educational classes and to sustain the parent-child relationship while they are in custody.

The program's goals are:

- To maintain and/or strengthen the parent-child relationship during incarceration and lessen the trauma of separation for the children through contact visits;
- To collaborate with community agencies to provide educational classes that equip incarcerated parents with the skills necessary for effective parenting; and
- To link incarcerated parents with community resources available to them upon release.

The MATCH program gives incarcerated mothers a bi-monthly, 1-hour contact visit, which helps lessen the trauma of separation for the children. MATCH moms have an opportunity to provide emotional support and practice positive parenting skills that they have learned in class.

Inmates who are not enrolled in the MATCH program have visits that are limited to 20 minutes, and family members are separated by a glass window.

Our capacity for the MATCH program ranges from 24 to 30 women who are classified as medium- and lower-custody levels. Women with either misdemeanor or felony charges are eligible to participate. Their stay in the MATCH unit typically ranges from 30 to 90 days. There is a waiting list of about 10 women at any time.

### **e-Reader Breakthrough**

MATCH's most unique feature is our digital library partnership to encourage reading by inmate moms and their children. Bexar County BiblioTech Library provides an e-reader with downloaded books for the mothers to read while they are in the MATCH unit. MATCH staff selects the parenting book that will be downloaded, and a BiblioTech volunteer will facilitate a weekly group to discuss each chapter.

The Bexar County BiblioTech Digital Library provides the technology. Bexar County recently created this digital-only model and branded it as BiblioTech. The BiblioTech Digital Library is the first all-digital public library in the United States. Community service is a major focus of BiblioTech librarians and staff.

In this collaborative pilot project, BiblioTech is providing e-readers for women inmates in the jail's MATCH program. BiblioTech staff trained MATCH staff on the devices so they could in turn educate and train the MATCH participants. There were some challenges early on in the pilot, when inmates didn't know how to use the devices. Now, training has become easier.

The collaboration makes the technology aspects of the program easy for the jail.

- The e-readers do not allow the inmates Internet access.
- To keep track of the e-readers, the unit officer records the serial numbers of the machines assigned to each participant. The tablets stay in the housing unit until they are collected by MATCH staff for recharging.
- The MATCH staff selects the books that the inmates will read, and the BiblioTech library staff loads them onto the e-readers.

Core books include a dictionary, a thesaurus, and the Bible. *Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul* is another favorite of the inmates.

Other books are made available to support the parenting skills development aspects of MATCH. When a new participant enters the program, she is assigned to read a book titled, *Screamfree Parenting* (Runkel, 2007).

Each week, MATCH participants have 10 hours of classroom time and 10 hours set aside for reading. MATCH staff gives the inmates reading assignments that accommodate participants at different levels of skill in reading. Participants then review and discuss the reading material as a group in the unit.

MATCH also motivates inmates to read with their children during contact visits. Children's books are available in a library for visitation.

The e-reader program is not focused only on benefiting the mother-child relationship; it also is envisioned as having a long-term impact on community reading and literacy. The program encourages the whole family to read. While the mothers are in the program, they learn to use the tablet technology, and many also develop better reading skills. Some participants have never used a thesaurus before encountering one during their MATCH stay. Their children may

or may not already know how to use an e-reader, as many families of inmates do not have Internet access at home. The children can register as BiblioTech users at a local library branch and take advantage of free community resources. Brochures are sent home with the children after their contact visits to help educate their caregivers on the free print and digital books and media that kids can get from the library.

Some new developments are planned for the short-term future. BiblioTech expects to provide a volunteer to the jail who has some college-level criminal justice background. The volunteer will lead discussions in a “book club” model.

In the current pilot program, the e-readers are only given to women who are MATCH program participants, as they are all housed in the same unit. If the Sheriff and Jail Administrator decide to expand the e-reader program, it will most likely start with the PATCH unit for fathers (Papas) because the program has close staff supervision.

### Other Program Components

In addition to the e-reader-based programming discussed above, MATCH participants receive other programming on a variety of topics that equip mothers to be successful in raising their children. Each community agency that comes into the facility uses its own agency’s curriculum. Programs usually cycle on a three-month schedule. This is a unique way of introducing community resources to incarcerated mothers.

There is a saying that, “Today’s inmate is tomorrow’s neighbor,” so as a society we need to ask ourselves the question, “What kind of neighbors do we want?” Incarceration is a community problem, and the different agencies that come in to share information are a part of the community solution.

Several community partners join us in delivering programs to MATCH participants.

- **JP Training and Consulting Services (JPTCS)** provides the Raindrops to Rainbows parenting program. It is delivered in an interactive style with hands-on activities, group discussions, video, and lectures. Participants learn about brain and child development, the consequences of substance abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, neglect, and parental incarceration, and how to access community resources.
- **Baptist Child and Family Services, Inc.,** provides a curriculum called Texas Families Together and Safe (TFTS) that is designed to assist parents in helping their children reach their full potential. It promotes better caregiving skills to help parents become self-sufficient and successfully nurture their children.

- **ABC (Any Baby Can)** provides instruction on the Shaken Baby Syndrome, Safe Sleep, and Early Development curriculums. Babies who suffer injury or death from violent shaking are victims of what is called Shaken Baby Syndrome.
- **Anger Solutions Network** teaches the Living Peacefully in an Angry World curriculum to address anger management issues.
- **Chrysalis Ministries, Inc.**, provides programs on Managing My Life, Change Plan, Chemical Dependency, Healthy Relationships, Anger Awareness, Character Development, and Theft Addiction and Recovery.
- **Family Violence Prevention Services, Inc.**, teaches a Caring, Protecting & Safety course and also provides individual counseling for women in violent relationships.
- The **Office of the Attorney General** teaches the Incarcerated Parents and Child Support course.
- The **San Antonio Police Department's Victim Advocacy Section** teaches a program on Domestic Violence Awareness.
- The **San Antonio Public Library's Little Read Wagon** literacy program encourages parents to read to their children.
- **Texas A&M University LIFE Extension** provides a class on Food and Nutrition.
- The **YWCA** teaches the Family, Friends and Neighbors curriculum, which focuses on child abuse, neglect, and positive family relations.

In 2013, 284 women were accepted into the MATCH program, and MATCH helped 349 children have a contact visit with their mothers. MATCH program staff and community agency representatives delivered 299 educational classes to these women, and participants earned 878 curriculum-based certificates in the subjects mentioned above.

### Evidence of Success

Incentives can be the driving force in the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals. Children are the incentive for MATCH program participants. Incarcerated mothers modify their behavior every day in the unit so they can hug and hold their children twice a month. They abstain from receiving any disciplinary write-ups, and they refrain from physical altercations so as not to lose their special contact visits with their children.

Two main goals of any reentry program are community safety and offender reintegration. To determine if the MATCH program reduces recidivism, the Bexar County Sheriff's Office commissioned a study in 2014 led by Dr. Durant Frantzen, a criminologist and faculty member at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. Comparing MATCH participants to a control group, he

found that those who remained in the program for up to 2 months had a 3-year re-arrest rate that was 13.5% lower than program drop-outs, defined as those who participated for 1 week or less (Frantzen, 2014).

The Bexar County Sheriff's Office celebrated the MATCH Program's 30th anniversary this year by honoring 15 former MATCH Program participants who have stayed out of jail for a combined total of 189 years. At \$45 per day for a jail bed, their success represents a savings to taxpayers of more than \$3 million. One former MATCH participant who was highlighted at the event completed her bachelor's and master's degrees from Texas A&M University and has worked for Bexar County as a Reentry Specialist. Some of the other former MATCH ladies have become Licensed Professional Counselors and Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselors in the community. Most rewarding is the fact that many of them have resumed their responsibilities as nurturing mothers and grandmothers. There is another saying that states, "Educate a mother and you educate a family." The MATCH program seeks to educate families by having an impact on the mothers.

Many jurisdictions have visited Bexar County over the past 30 years to learn the principles of the MATCH program for replication elsewhere. They include jails and prisons in Texas, nationwide, and from as far away as Norway and Australia. MATCH has sparked imaginations in the world community as well.

The program has been nominated for the American Correctional Association's 2015 Innovation in Corrections award by Susan Pamerleau, Sheriff of Bexar County, Texas. In 2010, the MATCH/PATCH Program was given the Best Practices Award by the Texas Public Policy Foundation. In 2009, Our Lady of the Lake University Worden School of Social Work awarded the MATCH/PATCH Program as an outstanding Community Partner of Excellence in Service-Learning. MATCH also won a County Best Practices Innovation Award from the Texas Association of Counties Leadership Foundation in 2000.

## Conclusion

Bexar County Jail Programs Manager, Aida Negron says, "During the time the women are in the program, we want to introduce them to as much life-changing information as possible. Our hope is that the classes, the contact visits, and the e-reader book program will impact their lives and transform them into positive role models for their children to emulate. We are purposefully trying to interrupt the cycle of generational incarceration. By positively affecting a mother, we affect her children, and subsequently the family and then the community."

Bexar County Sheriff, Susan Pamerleau says: “We are seeing that building more jails and prisons is not the way states want to go . . . By using best practices and providing evidence-based programming to women, we can impact this generation so they don’t repeat the cycle . . . that is the way to go.”

### To Learn More

BiblioTech: Bexar County Digital Library <http://bexarbibliotech.org/>

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Document available at:

[http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national\\_jail\\_exchange/archive/2014/11/04/digital-library-collaboration-gives-a-reading-boost-to-moms-in-bexar-county-jail.aspx](http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2014/11/04/digital-library-collaboration-gives-a-reading-boost-to-moms-in-bexar-county-jail.aspx)

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